

# MYTHS ABOUT THE GIFTED

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What are gifted children really like? Are they puny weaklings with two left feet? Are they prone to physical and mental illness? Are they all social misfits? Will they be likely to burn out early or die young? No, none of the above is true. Yet misconceptions like these abound, and continue to injure the gifted.

## Early Myths

Myths about the gifted arose in two stages. The older myths deprecate giftedness; the newer ones simply justify ignoring it. Three centuries-old folk tales that appear immune to the facts are:

“Any special ability is compensated for by a disability.”

“Early ripe, early rot.”

“Genius is akin to madness.”

These myths attempt to offset the value of giftedness by presuming that there is some inherent flaw that accompanies a special talent. They probably developed from our inability to reconcile our belief in equality with our observations that some individuals are vastly more capable than the rest of us. By giving the gifted person a handicap, we make it less desirable to be gifted, and we can dismiss the inequality. At the turn of the century, this “law of compensation” was believed as firmly as the law of gravity:

Just as giants pay a heavy ransom for their stature in sterility and relative muscular and mental weakness, so the giants of thought expiate their intellectual force in degeneration and psychoses. It is thus that the signs of degeneration are found more frequently in men of genius than even in the insane. (Lombroso, 1905, p. 42)

Terman (1925), Cox (1926), Witty (1930), Hollingworth (1926), Lewis (1943), and a host of others presented strong evidence to counter these myths. Hollingworth (1926) challenged the unscientific way in which Lombroso and his followers collected illustrative examples to support their preconceived biases. Lewis Terman devoted most of his life to research he hoped would permanently rid the world of these disparaging beliefs. He and his colleagues studied over 1,500 gifted individuals in the most extensive study of its kind ever undertaken. Although Terman died in 1956, this work is still underway and scheduled to continue until every “Termite” is deceased. The latest research on this group can be found in literature on aging.

A century of research has thoroughly discredited the “law” of compensation. On the contrary, scientific studies of child development reveal that, “Correlation and not compensation is the rule in development” (Lefrancois, 1981, p. 88). “There is no shred of evidence to support the widespread opinion that typically the intellectually precocious child is weak, undersized, or nervously unstable” (Terman, 1925, p. 634).

As a group, Terman’s subjects were found to be above average in all categories studied: height, weight, early physical development, physique, general health, emotional stability, social adjustment, moral character, and school achievement. There was greater variability within the group, however, and these composite results did not truly reflect individual performances (Terman, 1925). Later reports of these individuals at mid-life appear to indicate that the gifted are less vulnerable to mental illness, suicide, divorce, and mental deterioration than the general population (Terman & Oden, 1947; 1959). Increases in mental ability were found through middle age, and longevity was much more prevalent than early death, particularly for high-achieving males. Underachieving males did not enjoy longevity.

Less is known about the achievement of women in Terman’s studies, since the cultural milieu forced most of them to give up their aspirations. Sears and Barbee (1977) studied the life satisfaction of gifted women in the Terman sample when they were in their mid-60s. Career women reported more satisfaction and fewer regrets over their life choices than did homemakers. Single women were the most satisfied with their work patterns, followed by married women with no children, divorced women, married women with children, and then widows. Much to the researchers’ surprise, single heads of households (single, divorced, or widowed) were generally happier than married women. “This is in distinct contrast to the normative samples, in which the divorced, widowed, and employed women come out lower in general happiness than do the married housewives” (Sears & Barbee, 1977, p. 57).

## **The New Myths**

As the old myths began to fade, they were replaced by a new breed. The new myths do not attack the gifted, but rather provide excuses for neglecting them. Scant research is available to rebut these claims, but ample experience contests them.

“A gifted child must be gifted in everything.”

“Gifted children can make it on their own. They don't need special attention.”

“All parents think their children are gifted.”

“It doesn't make any difference if the child is a little advanced, since the others will catch up sooner or later.”

“Singling out the gifted will cause them to become elitist.”

“Provisions for the gifted are basically undemocratic.”

### **“A Gifted Child Must be Gifted in Everything”**

A misunderstanding of the Terman results has led to still another myth, perhaps the most punitive of all to the gifted child: “A gifted child must be gifted in everything.” In their zeal to counter the prevailing myths, the early researchers were so successful that they inadvertently created a new myth of the gifted as superstar. Teachers began to believe that if a child is gifted in one area, he or she should be gifted in all areas and perfectly well-behaved. This is the myth assumed by teachers when they say, “If you’re so gifted, why are you running down the hall?” “Why can’t you tie your shoes?” “Why don’t you have straight A’s?” “How can you say Sallie is gifted when she spells so poorly?”

These arguments humiliate gifted children and negate the special talents they do have. Beethoven was not the world’s best scientist, and I doubt that people will long remember Newton's musical accomplishments. Most people are talented in a special area, not in all areas of accomplishment. This myth has made it difficult to identify twice exceptional children (gifted children with learning disabilities).

### **“Gifted Children Can Make it on Their Own”**

The facts indicate that the gifted do not always make it on their own. A large percentage of drop-outs are gifted students (Marland, 1972); a number of gifted youth find their way into juvenile courts (Seeley & Mahoney, 1981); and underachievement is a pervasive problem (Whitmore, 1980). Gifted children are often discovered in classes for the learning disabled or emotionally disturbed (Silverman, 1980). And then there are countless cases of vanishing giftedness—those children whose talents are destroyed through lack of detection and development (Gallagher, 1979).

### **“All Parents Think Their Children are Gifted”**

Although it is commonly heard that “All parents think their children are gifted,” in reality the opposite problem is far greater. One study found that only 50% of the children who tested within the gifted range were recognized by their parents as having special abilities (Dickinson, 1970). When parents fail to notice their children's talents, they make no effort to provide opportunities for the development of these talents.

Even when parents suspect that their child may have unusual abilities, they are reluctant to admit that the child might be gifted. Giftedness is stigmatized in our society. It is less comfortable for a mother to say, “I have a gifted child,” than it is for her to say, “I have a disabled child.” Other parents might feel she was bragging, and school personnel probably would not take her seriously.

In 60 years of teaching, counseling, and assessing gifted children, I have met few parents who wrongly judged their children to be gifted. Even in cases where children failed to meet the cut-off score for giftedness on the intelligence scale, they exhibited other signs of high ability, and usually demonstrated giftedness in **some** areas assessed (Silverman, Chitwood & Waters, 1986; Silverman, 2008).

Several years ago, I had the opportunity of addressing hundreds of parents at schools in a well-educated community. I offered these parents a free mentor to work with their child in **any** area in which they felt the child showed special interest. All that was required of them was to join the local association for the gifted, at a cost of \$5.00 (Silverman, 2007). No assessment of the child's abilities would be made. No more than two parents at each open house were willing to talk with me about the possibility of their children participating in the program.

A typical discussion with one of these parents began with, "My child isn't **really** gifted, but..." and finished with a description of the child's chemistry laboratory; the 20 books devoured each week, all of them five years above grade level; the astronomical scores on achievement tests; and the child's endless complaints about school being boring. The children described were not just gifted, they were highly gifted; yet their parents could not admit this even to themselves.

In the last 30 years, the Gifted Development Center has assessed over 5,500 children from all over the globe, brought to us primarily on the basis of parent referral. At least 84% of the parents who perceive that their children fit 75% of the traits in our *Characteristics of Giftedness Scale* [www.gifteddevelopment.com] test above 120 IQ (Silverman, Chitwood & Waters, 1986; Silverman, 2008). This percentage increases when we include the parents of twice exceptional children, whose composite IQ scores do not accurately reflect the full strength of their abilities. Over 95% of the parents had children who demonstrated peaks in the gifted range in some areas. In actuality, parents have proven to be reliable and accurate identifiers of giftedness in their children (Robinson, 2008; Silverman & Miller, in press).

### **"The Others Will Catch Up Anyway"**

Many parents and teachers believe that even when children are developmentally advanced in early childhood, and come to school already knowing how to read, the other children will eventually "catch up." Again, just the opposite proves to be the case. When educated appropriately, the gap between the gifted and their age-mates widens with age (Martinson, 1974; Silverman, 1998).

Gifted children have a different trajectory of development from average learners. Their minds are like new high-powered computers that process greater amounts of information at a more rapid rate, organize that material more efficiently, integrate it with other information more systematically, and retrieve it more easily. The only way an older,

less powerful computer can appear to match a newer model in capabilities is by using only a small fraction of the capacity of the newer model.

The computer analogy is not far off the mark. In terms of the gifted, the rate at which learning occurs, the amount that is learned, and the efficiency with which that learning is organized cannot be matched by average learners. Each year the storehouse of information of the gifted child increases at a geometric rate compared with an arithmetic rate of growth in the average child. The only way the average child could appear to “catch up” would be to **retard** the development of the gifted child.

The goals of the educational process are not the same for all students. One student needs to master enough basic mathematics to be able to balance a checkbook in adult life, while another needs to understand enough advanced mathematics to be able to discover a new source of energy. If the educational goal of one student is to be able to read books and the goal of another is to be able to write them, there is no point in keeping both of these students at the same level of instruction. This prevents the natural progress of the rapid learner and frustrates the slower one.

### **“Special Attention to the Gifted Makes Them Elitist”**

The most emotionally charged myth is the one that asserts that any grouping of gifted children will lead to elitism. Elitism runs against the very fiber of our democratic system; however no research supports this fear (Marland, 1972; Newland, 1976; Silverman, 1992). For more than 75 years, we have had studies which suggest that “conceit was corrected, rather than fostered, by the experience of daily contact with a large number of equals” (Hollingworth, 1931, p. 445).

In studying the social ramifications of special services for the gifted, Newland (1976) concluded that there is no evidence to indicate that classes for the gifted breed unfavorable social attitudes. On the contrary, his review of the literature revealed that the gifted tend to be liked and accepted by their classmates, regardless of school placement, and that they are often chosen as leaders by their peers. The fact that they are selected as leaders seemed significant to him, since students would be unlikely to choose leaders who are aloof or conceited. He maintains that snobbishness is more often in the eyes of the beholder than in the students themselves.

More elitism is fostered by keeping gifted children with their non-gifted age-mates than by grouping them with one another (Silverman, 1992). One gets a warped idea of his place in the world when he is the top banana all the way through school without having to exert much effort. For many students, placement in classes for the gifted is the first time they come across anyone as capable as themselves (Hollingworth, 1931). They soon learn that there will always be someone smarter than them in some areas, and this breeds humility, not arrogance.

From my observations, children who seem to exhibit “superiority complexes” are usually covering up inferiority complexes; they feel inferior to other children when they are not accepted. They assume that there must be something wrong with them or the other children would like them and want to play with them. A child who is tormented by his peers may use his intellect as a weapon. These behaviors usually disappear when gifted children find others like themselves.

The only times I’ve seen what might appear to be elitist attitudes in groups of gifted children has been when the group has been scapegoated or teased by other children in the school. As a group, the gifted tend to be compassionate, not cruel (Silverman, 1983; 1994). Cruelty is a symptom that the child is emotionally crippled in some way, and the child's pain manifests in a distorted manner.

### **“Provisions for the Gifted are Undemocratic”**

The idea that special provisions for the gifted are undemocratic comes from the earlier tracking systems in our country which often acted as a means of *de facto* segregation. Because disproportionate numbers of children from minority groups were placed in the lower ability tracks, court cases contested the tracking of children by ability. There is still some question about the efficacy of ability grouping (Slavin, 1986), but some analyses indicate that the one population for which such grouping is appropriate is the gifted (Kulik & Kulik, 1982).

A related misconception is that gifted children only come from affluent families, so providing for the gifted would be giving more privileges to the privileged. In fact, gifted children are found in all socio-economic levels and in all races (Dickinson, 1956; Marland, 1972). It is now considered acceptable practice to “cluster” children of high ability, provided that there are safeguards assuring that all populations have equal access to the program. Many programs for the gifted include proportionate numbers of the various ethnic groups represented in the community.

### **Conclusion**

These myths are more than just inaccurate; they are destructive. They prevent the gifted child from being understood, accepted, and served appropriately by the school system. Some humiliate the child personally. Others are used as an excuse for negligence. The first step toward helping the gifted child is to eradicate these myths through awareness activities that involve the entire community: teachers, parents, students, and other community members.

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